
Sinks that stink

As nearly everyone knows, the world is heating up, and one of the main causes of climate change is the use of fossil fuels. Under pressure, the industrialized countries most responsible for this state of affairs made some minimal commitments to reduce their fossil fuel emissions in the Kyoto Protocol of 1997. However, some of the most polluting countries are trying to find ways out of their commitments, using potential loopholes in the Protocol which may allow them to plant millions of hectares of trees in Southern countries as a substitute for cutting emissions at source.

Partly in order to assess the scientific validity of this approach, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) appointed a panel to put together a Special Report on Land Use, Land Use Change, and Forestry. The report, released in May, has disappointed many activists by giving a "scientific" stamp of approval to a carbon market which would generate profits for a small number of mostly Northern companies and consultants, allow industrialized countries to continue emitting carbon to the atmosphere, impact negatively on people and the environment in the South --and fail to slow climate change.

How was it possible for the IPCC to produce such a report? Why didn't the scientists do their job properly? The answer is probably very complex, having to do with peer pressure, political influence from the US, personal ambition, and the fact that out of hundreds of authors and commentators on the report, only a tiny handful were social scientists or experienced in grassroots political realities. But one of the reason's for the report's failure is, sadly, surely quite simple: some of the authors (and the companies they work for) will benefit financially from having drawn the conclusions they drew. The following are only a few examples:

Sandra Brown of the US is a Coordinating Lead Author of Chapter 5 ("Project-Based Activities") and the Summary for Policymakers of the report. Brown is Senior Program Officer for Winrock International, an Arlington, Virginia-based nonprofit organization which accepts contracts from "public and private" sources. Winrock provides forest carbon monitoring technical services to government agencies such as the U.S. Initiative on Joint Implementation and a wide range of private sector and non-governmental organizations.

Pedro Moura-Costa, another important author of Chapter 5, is a UK-based executive of Ecosecurities Ltd., a consulting firm with offices in the US, Brazil, Australia and The Netherlands. Ecosecurities "specializes in the generation of Emission Reduction Credits" and stands to make large profits from its involvement in carbon forestry.

Gareth Philips of the UK, another Lead Author of Chapter 5, works for Societe Generale de Surveillance (SGS) Forestry of Geneva, which earns money from designing, monitoring and certifying carbon forestry projects, including quantifying carbon impacts. SGS certifies the Certified Tradeable Offsets offered by Costa Rica and hopes to expand its work elsewhere in the carbon forestry field. Philips and SGS thus have a vested interest in arguing that quantification of the climate effects of carbon forestry makes sense.

Richard Tipper of the UK, also an author of Chapter 5, is on the staff of the Edinburgh Centre for Carbon Management, a consulting company which earns money from designing, assessing and monitoring carbon forestry projects. ECCM works closely with Future Forests, which has carbon forestry contracts with Mazda, Avis, BT and other companies. ECCM staff have also been involved in a forestry project financed in part by the Federation Internationale de l'Automobile in Mexico. Using lands inhabited by highland Mayan Tojolobal and lowland Mayan Tzeltal communities, the project is designed to "offset" the 5,500 tonnes of carbon emitted annually by Formula One car racing at a price of 38,000 UK pounds a year.

Mark Trexler of the US, a Review Editor of the same chapter, runs Trexler & Associates, a firm which has made money -and is likely to make millions of dollars more- by promoting and monitoring carbon sequestration and other "climate mitigation" projects.

Peter Hill of the US, a Lead Author of Chapter 4 ("Additional Human-Induced Activities -- Article 3.4"), is with Monsanto Corporation. Monsanto has a large stake in genetically modified organisms, including, potentially, organisms modified to take up or store carbon more efficiently. Hill's corporation too thus stands to make increased profits as a result of the IPCC report's optimistic findings about the possibility of using land and forest projects to mitigate climate change.

These and many other authors and editors of the IPCC Special Report on Land Use, Land Use Change and Forestry had vested interests in reaching unrealistically and unjustifiably optimistic conclusions about the possibility of compensating for emissions with trees. They should therefore have been automatically disqualified from serving on an intergovernmental panel charged with investigating impartially the feasibility and benefits of such "offset" projects. As things stand, the report must now be shelved due to their clear conflict of interest and a new report instigated which will be free of the taint of intellectual corruption.

It's official: the carbon sink approach now definitely stinks.